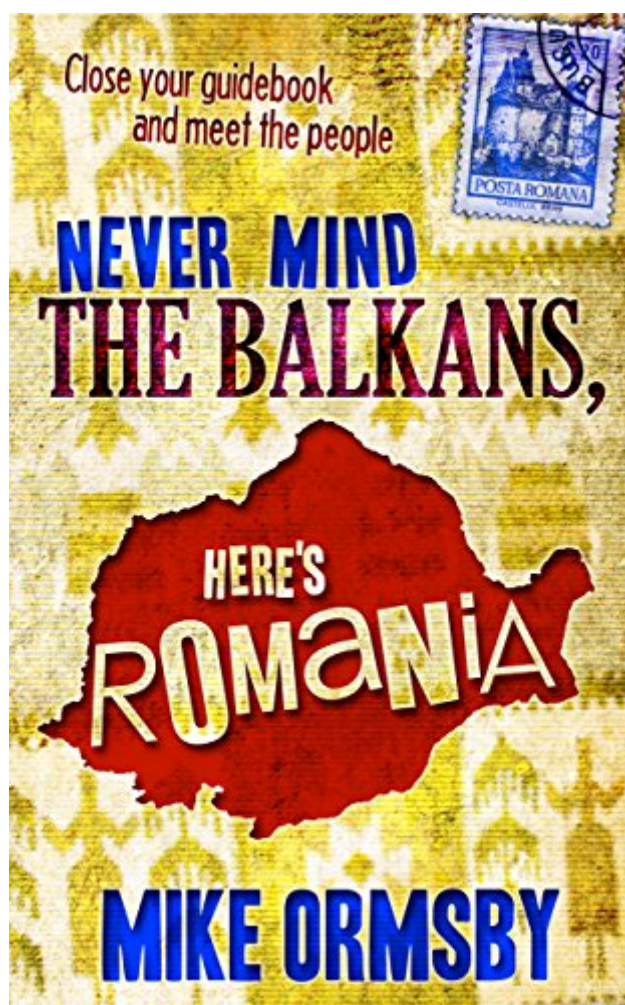


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Never Mind The Balkans, Here's Romania: Close Your Guidebook And Meet The People!



Synopsis

'Never Mind the Balkans, Here's Romania' has been described as one of the best guide books on Romania. If you want to discover Romania with someone who knows it well, Mike Ormsby's travel writing is for you. Whilst the average Romania travel guide provides details of places to visit, this writer takes a different approach. Ormsby gets up close and personal, blending journalistic objectivity with dry wit to craft true-life stories about the people who live in Romania: from friendly hikers and shepherds in Transylvania, to exasperated taxi drivers and bossy bureaucrats in Bucharest. Ormsby's bittersweet short stories are a quick and easy read yet offer fascinating glimpses of an enthralling land that Vlad the Impaler - real life inspiration for gothic legend Dracula - once ruled with an iron fist. Mike Ormsby's first visited Romania in spring 1994 as a BBC reporter. Touched by the hospitality and wry humour of the local people, he soon returned to teach journalism at BBC World Service School in Bucharest, and remained in that post for several years, writing in his spare time. Published in 2008, 'Never Mind the Balkans, Here's Romania', was well received by Romania's literary critics, several of whom dubbed Ormsby 'The British Caragiale', in deference to their beloved fin-de-siècles satirist and playwright. Ion Luca Caragiale shone a humorous and affectionate light on Romania in his era, and Mike Ormsby does the same in ours. Numerous expats and visitors have also welcomed the book as a unique and modern variation on the more conventional Romania travel guide. 'Never Mind the Balkans, Here's Romania' is a memorable collection of travel writing that provides a unique insight into this irresistible country, where locals say, "Ca la noi, la nimeni - there's nobody quite like us." So, close your guide book and meet the people! Ormsby's cast of colourful characters will entertain, educate, and even enrage - it depends who's reading. Many reviewers praise the book's frank and funny descriptions of life in Romania: "This chronicle of slightly agonised passion for a country and its people is exactly the kind of Romania guidebook that a visitor needs - an insight into the culture's paradoxical heart." "Wonderfully captures many aspects of living and working in Romania - funny, frequently frustrating and uniquely Romanian." "A good read on the cultural changes in post-communist Romania with a comical slant. An interesting piece of social commentary." "A fascinating view of Romanian people, witty and readable." "If you enjoy honest travel writing this is definitely worth a read." "If you're planning a trip or have already been, this is an insightful, informative, and funny book on Romania and Romanians." "The book is a series of short witty essays about everyday life and friendships in modern Romania. Ormsby skilfully brings out

the contradictions, contrasts, warmth, and beauty of a fascinating country and its colourful people. **Never Mind the Balkans, Here's Romania** is an intimate tour of Romania with an expert guide. Perfect for the truly adventurous as well as the armchair traveller. Ormsby smuggles you deep inside this extraordinary country and into the minds of its people. A brilliant read. **"A fascinating journey through Romanian geography and culture, told with warmth and hope. I loved this book. An anecdotal review of life in Romania from the perspective of an Englishman with typically dry humour. Highly recommended, a great read, and I was laughing from beginning to end. A realistic and very humorous insight into the Romanian psyche. As someone who has travelled extensively in Romania I could relate to many incidents. Never Mind the Balkans has become one of the best-selling books ever written about Romania by a foreigner. Romania is the protagonist of the book, not Mike Ormsby."**

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Travelers & Explorers

Customer Reviews

There is not much to say about a book poorly written, displaying contempt about people in a country the author decided to call home. A country that feeds him and his family. I regret that such a book was written, published and that I spent money on it and time reading it..See also other one star reviews.

As a PCV in Moldova for the past 2 years, I felt like I was reading about a parallel experience. It gives me hope for Moldova (especially if they join the EU) because the few times I've been to Romania, it seems to have improved since the time this book was written.

At first I thought I wouldn't like this book - it's a book of very short stories about small events in the author's life. At first the stories annoyed me since they have no ending. I think the main reason I expected not to like it was the ugly cover and dumb title. But the book grew on me. Mike Ormsby is an English journalist who has lived in a number of different countries and has settled in Bucharest. The stories are conversations or adventures he has with Romanian friends or alone. Many of them are sort of bleak, not awful but not upbeat. It's clear that Romania doesn't run very well - politicians are corrupt, laws are not enforced, decisions are made that make little sense. People drink and smoke a lot and are not generally optimistic. I don't know for sure why Mr Ormsby has stayed so long except that he likes the people. But by the middle I felt like I got some insight into Romania and its inhabitants. And that's good enough for me.

I wanted to like this...I really did. However, I felt that the stories came across as mean-spirited. It may be a cultural or a contextual thing but I didn't warm to the book and wasn't inspired to keep working on liking it. You may think differently...

Admittedly, it has taken me some time to discover *Never Mind the Balkans, Here's Romania*, first published in 2008, yet here I am now, eager to fill that awkward gap. In this collection of fifty-seven short stories, Mike Ormsby, a writer and former BBC journalist/World Service trainer, chronicles various moments of his experiences in Romania between 1994 and 2006, when Romania became his home. Published simultaneously in Romanian as *Grand Bazar Romania* (translated by Vlad A. Arghir), Ormsby's book received a range of reactions - from sheer enthusiasm to harsh criticism - mostly depending on readers' personal visions, expectations, and sometimes, on their nationality. Personally, I could not help getting absorbed in tales that so vividly evoke situations and characters almost identical to those I have come across, eight years later. Irony - and, even

more valuable, self-deprecating irony - seems to me the X-factor which makes you enjoy reading this book, to the point that some local critics have dubbed Ormsby *„the new British Caragiale“*, after the 19th century playwright and satirist. Alas, I wish I knew more about Caragiale - just another one of the huge gaps I still need to fill - to fully appreciate that comment, surely enough, though, the author's funny and bittersweet tone works as an antidote to his keen empathy with Romanians and their unique land, providing him with a safe distance from which to observe the scene. This book strikes me for having succeeded in assembling such a vivid gallery of characters, so powerfully close to the "real thing": you cannot but feel grateful for that. In each story, the author blends into his surrounding and allows characters to speak for themselves. His voice is never invasive nor in the least sounding like the usual "wise guy from the West". Rather, quite often he limits himself to acting as litmus paper within his environment, letting people and situations speak for themselves. Like in *Why Not*, where his artistic projects with his friend Adrian finally cannot but crash when faced with the dumb indifference of an incompetent journalist, whereas in *Nice Sofa*, Ormsby lucidly stops aside to actually wonder, "Was it my fault? Was I some wise guy from the West, with big ideas?" So, as I went on reading - always with valuable help from my Urban Dictionary - I enjoyed descriptions conjuring up, in a bunch of words, whole human landscapes and situations. More. Many tales leave you with a surreal aftertaste, not an infrequent impression in Romania. Take *Labyrinth*, where characters successfully incarnate one mainstream approach to life here: "Live by the rules and don't get stressed." Others - with generous help from serendipity - focus on the past or dig into local history to finally present you with little treasures, like *Buried*, where, en passant, Mihai Eminescu is described as that chap "with the rock-star looks". The tale sheds light on the little known, tragic biography of a promising young translator, Corneliu Popescu, whom Ormsby discovers by chance while searching in the public library for English translations of Romanian authors. As a teenager, Popescu translated Eminescu, and brilliantly so, but died alongside his mother in the 1977 earthquake. Another kind of sadness takes you when reading tales like *'paga*, depicting the use of bribes as the mainstream strategy to solve any practical problem or life issue, applicable at every possible social level. The good thing about these tales is that they are not Bucharest-centred: Ormsby travels the whole country and encounters very different human habitats. In *The Wrong Place*, we end up in a small village, Tu'nad, with poor Tanti Dorina who is caught in her damp bed between past and future, whereas in *Too Good To Be True*, a hiking trip takes us up into the Carpathian Mountains, dangerously close to angry sheepdogs. But it is definitely in tales like *Faith*, *Hope*, and *Chablis* that I most appreciate Ormsby's voice. Here, two

worlds - West and East Europe (allow me to generalise) appear to get extremely close one another, yet something goes wrong and it does smack of us-and-them - indeed a chasm - unless prejudice and self assurance are not won by good will and a sincere wish to understand "the other". I won't say more, because I do invite you to pick up this book and enjoy your reading. Overall, I am grateful to Ormsby and will steal a quote from John Lennon, one which the author passes on to his friend George, a character we meet in several tales: "Life is what happens while you are making other plans."

In the Romanian version of the creation myth God creates the earth and starts assigning different people to different lands, but realizes suddenly that one land has every natural resource and would dominate the world. "I know", says God, "I will give it to the Romanians, because they would never manage to conquer the world." "Never mind the Balkans, here's Romania" is a wonderful book that brought back many happy memories of the two years that I and my family spent in Romania from 1994-1996. I read the book cover to cover the minute it arrived, and couldn't put it down. In fact I read many of the stories outloud to my family. Romania and the Romanians are wonderful, but yet at times maddening. Romanian humor is itself often self-deprecating, and Mike Ormsby conveys just that gentle, loving sort of humor in portraying Romania. You will love Romania, and you will love this book.

This is not a travel guide nor a travelogue. Mike's short stories give an insider's look into the Romanian soul.

One of the wittiest and most introspective books ever written about Romanians and Romania. It is not for nothing that Romanians rightfully consider Mike Orms very close to their modern-day Romanian giant satirist, Ion Luca Caragiale. Ormsby does not criticize or patronize, he only observes! Ormsby is able to introspect and fully understand both city dwellers and countryside Romanians. Upon all he sees and observes, he masterfully "transplants" his British keen sense of humour. A must read for every open minded reader.

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